The Nothingness in Samuel Beckett's Prose Writing *How It Is* as an Aesthetic Concept

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1. Introduction

In Beckett's body of works it is the aesthetic process that raises questions on the interpreter's side, as aestheticism is a complex term with many connotations. The current word derives from the Greek "aesthetes" and denotes 'one who perceives'. With Beckett though, we encounter "nothingness" as a prevailing theme of his work and this concept stemming from his very profound engagement with Greek philosophy and later German thinkers as Fritz Mauthner and Wilhelm Windelband seemed to have a special effect on his mental makeup and manner of perceiving the world. This is thus the case of the much applauded and sometimes even almost rejected novel *How It Is*, a novel that renders the process of writing in a new and revolving manner, somehow unparalleled in English literature up to that time.

2. The History of the Theory of Aesthetic Reception

In 1750 A.T. Baumgarten wrote in his treatise, *Aesthetica* about the criticism of taste and therefore his work was considered a philosophical one. The term aesthetic gradually meant something that pertains to the criticism of the beautiful and to the theory of taste. An esthete is one who pursues and is devoted to the 'beautiful in art', in music and in literature, as the essential concern here. Thus, aestheticism is primarily the term given to a movement, a cult, a mode of sensibility (a way of looking at and feeling about things) in the 19th century.

Thus, the idea developed that art is self sufficient and needs not serve to other purpose than its own one; as art is an end in itself and does not need to be didactic, politically committed, propagandistic, moral or anything else as pursuing to be itself only. Hence, it should not be judged by any non-aesthetic criteria (e.g. whether or not it is useful) (Cuddon 1999: 11). The mentioning should be made here that this were some highly original and innovative ideas for that specific century in which realism and naturalism prevailed as the dominating literary streams.

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There should also be mentioned here the works of the renowned German writers of the Romantic period (q.v.): Kant, Schelling, Goethe and Schiller. In their theoretical works they all agreed that art must be autonomous and that the artist should not pay tribute to anyone (Friedrich Schiller: *Essay on the beautiful*). Eventually, the artist being a special person, apart from others, developed his own style and presented his own, unique view of the world (*ibidem*: 11). Thus, the poet developed later in the 19th century the image of being a bohemian and a non-conformist. It was a kind of a long time result of the Romanticism when the poets developed this self–culture and subjectivity, the cult of the individual ego and sensibility.

In this period two doctrines evolve: for once the one called 'art for art's sake' and the movement called Parnassianism (*ibidem*: 12). An authentic provider of a new aesthetic point of view is Thom Gautier with his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) (*ibidem*) Later on in the late Victorian period it is Swinburne that proclaimed the concept of "art for art's sake". Walter Pater was of the opinion that life itself should be treated as art. His collection of essays entitled *The Renaissance* (1873) had a major influence on the poets of the 90s: Wilde, Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Symons. These turned their back on hypocrisy and Philistinism. The genuine search for beauty a primarily purpose, aestheticism had an independent value, as it was a literary model towards which the writer could focus his creative energy and talent. At its worst possible form it deteriorated into posturing affectation and mannerism, to vapid idealism and eventually to a kind of silliness which is not wholly dead. Nowadays it could be identified out of society, as a kind of reaction against a corrupt and commercial society (*ibidem*: 13).

3. Beckett's notion of aesthetics from the standpoint of Romanian literary reception

An anthology of the evil is rebuilt by means of the paleontology. The author describes without hatred or anger, but can not be heard. Samuel Beckett sees himself as the last witness, not as a decadent author. Given our cultural context, Beckett's reception in Romania became a very spontaneous and sundry hermeneutic process:

> The circle is that movement from a guess at the whole meaning of a work to an analysis of parts in relation to the whole followed by a return to a modified understanding of 'the whole' of the work. It embodies the belief that part and whole are interdependent and have some necessary organic relationship. In this version of interpretation the historical gap which separates a literary work from critic or reader is a negative feature to be overcome by an oscillating movement between historical reconstruction on the one hand and divinatory acts of empathy (Cuddon 1999: 377).

Thus, each work of Beckett plays a certain role in the comprehension of his own aesthetics and poetic credo. However, the beginning literary experiences of Samuel Beckett show either the lack of decision, option or the not shared hope of entering culture through many other ways: The burlesque poem (*Whoroscope*) is synchronic with the volume of H. Michaux: *Un Certain Plume* and shares some commonalities with this one. An essay about Proust (1931) betrays a great literary affinity with him, too: the picaresque prose (1934), the cruelty poems (*Echo's*

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bones) are worth mentioning here, but all these do not seem to have any echo at all. The author continues to remain unknown (Beckett 1982: 5–30). In 1938 *Murphy* appears at the same time with Sartre's *La Nausea*, an epistemological farce. The '50s are favorable years. The occasion and the encounters with good playwrights and artists are the ones that function for him: Jerome Lindon and Robert Carlier (the 15th of November 1950). In 1952 the most successful plays were translated into 18 languages. But he could still not become a genuine popular author. Regarded as a very difficult prose writer, many obscure zones of his writings making it impossible to be surveyed by the critics, the model of his personae being Belacqua (Dante), Beckett is not a trivial writer and his work does not do the apology of the ugly or the evil. The phenomenology of suffering, of human declassification, of the search of the degraded values in a degraded universe is presented throughout his work, from the point of view of Romul Munteanu (a reputable Romanian literary critic) (Beckett 2005). The world is decentralized, the colors of the maize are dark and confusing and people become only reminisces of people, mere "fragments". They sometimes are thrown into philanthropic institutions, dressed aseptically, obliged to wander through barren cottages, caves, to sip milk from a lonely cow, to sleep in a barn with a pig, or in a boat where they await death as it is the case in the short story *The End*. Therefore, it was a "scandal" (outrage) that this kind of literary work initially brought with it. (The refusal of the publishing of the novel *Murphy* eight times and of *More Pricks than Kicks* just as well). It is true indeed, that the old of Beckett emanate awful smells, are dirty, suffer from prostate, have weak organs that they can not control and are repulsive some times even embittered and therefore they accept any kind of compromise driven by misery, but somehow they preserve their integrity (*ibidem*).

In their rudimental thinking some dreadful acts persist (real, but in most cases imaginary). Strange it is that these outlaws of society were once different. They have sediments of people that got educated. This is why these dirty angels of failure keep little and disturbing intervals of light while other voices, which talk about a mother and a father, creep lost in the shadow of the mind stricken by amnesia. Sometimes a corner of a garden appears, out of which the man from once is thrown out as from one mythological paradise. At this point a certain analogy with parts of Fritz Mauthner's essay on language can be traced: 'We find ourselves so deep into the domination of word's freedom, that we do not acknowledge, as we regard the air we breathe a "a nothingness" (according to Lavoisier and Priestley), while to the fish their water presumably is "a nothingness", the air as soon as they get into it, something palpable and gruesome" (Mauthner 1906: 152 [my translation]). Samuel Beckett proposed to express the unutterable in his work. However, he knows that the unutterable can not be said. With such texts out of which there seems to exhale the smell of the dirty rooms and of the sick bodies, it was expected for Beckett's work not to embrace a rapid access towards European recognition and not to find the entrance to the 'royal way of culture'. Always tormented, it seems, by the tension between the word and the silence, damned as Sysiphus to carry his stone towards expression, towards signification and thus to extinguish in an unintelligible stammer, attacked by a world that seems to enter synchronically into consciousness although it comes from different ages, Samuel Beckett confers to his literary creation the

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character of a memory disturbed by different sensors that request the coming out of the 'imagined' to the surface before disappearing into nonsense (*ibidem*).

4. The Meaning of the Futile Advance through the Mud

This novel that brought him the Nobel Prize together with the play *Waiting for Godot* renders the struggle of literary creation which reaches its peak here. The metaphorical usages of the names Pim, Prim, Bom, and Bam could stand for substitutes for emotions. Thus, the philosophy of the futility of an emotional life and of interrelationships becomes obvious, the internal dynamics of the novel reveals with sarcasm man's struggle with death, misery, emptiness and the meaninglessness of existence. These are similar to the pains of creation. The metaphor of the empty sack should account for this fact (Balotă 1997: 468–487).

The novel represents the search of oneself, the hunting for identity of some writers through their writing. The characters are decaying while searching for a sense of existence. They somehow resemble the mathematicians of ancient Greek times that were in search for the great solutions to their dilemmas, as Livio Mario tries to point out in his argument of the calculation of the golden ratio (Livio 2005: 273). The grotesque advance that exemplifies a parabola of stagnation, of the illusion of progress is very suggestive. In none of Beckett's works does the anthropologic vision of the writer project itself in a more severely reduced, more terrible mortified of the humane, than in the multilateral figure of the pilgrim through mud of the novel *How it Is* (Beckett 1964). It is as if we could reassess George Bernard Shaw's statement, who stated that the reasonable man tries to adapt himself to the world while the unreasonable would try to adapt the world to him, thus being the sole mobiliser of progress.

The image of the being that advances with the velocity of the snail, in a zigzag movement similar to the teeth of a jigsaw, has, in spite of the ridiculousness of such an advance, a faustical meaning. This "Streben", this strive towards the infinite, typically faustical can be recognized in the terrible effort of the anonymous being. This strive makes it humane. It is the only thing that remains after it has lost all that is human. The character of *How It Is* knows that besides him other billions advance in the same way that he does, but without his seeing them through the mud. Certainly, the advancement of this ridiculous 'homo viator' makes out of him an image of the human condition. The mud is nevertheless, the primordial clay of the bible of which man has been created and to which he will return (*ibidem*).

"Homo viator" in Beckett's work is represented mostly by a type of a philosophical *vagabundus*. The novels of this very original writer could be considered some kind of picaresque tales, some kind of *à rebours*. His preferred character, an exemplary *picaro* that is endowed with many talents is genial and in most cases an agile man (*ibidem*). He resembles sometimes Phidias, the famous sculptor who applied mathematical rules to his masterpieces. This is also the case with the main character of *How It Is* who does countless calculations and involves himself in a philosophical conundrum. Nevertheless, the torment seems to stop at the end of the poetic novel.

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However, agility is not a quality of Beckett's characters. These are often secluded in their incapacity, in their misery. Suffering is the natural condition of man in this anthropologic vision. The word is a manifestation of suffering as it is born out of it and seeks to mend it. The word, as we observed more closely later in Beckett's work, is essentially a lament and a thaumaturgical modality. The character is a tortured being that tortures. The physical pains became a habitude. They are associated with pleasure. The most intimate communication among people is done by suffering. The being has found another being that is named Pim. Its life is divided in three parts, before, with and after Pim but between the two the essential change is the suffering. When meeting Pim in the mud he martyrises him. The sadism associates with masochism: the executioner and its victim form a closer couple (and more frequent) in Beckett's universe than the lover and the mistress because it seems that the Nietzescheian desire for power prevails instead of Freud's libido:

> thump on skull no point in post mortems and then what then what we'll try and see last words cut thrust a few words. DO YOU LOVE ME CUNT no disappearance of Pim end of part two leaving only part three and last one can't go on one goes on as before can one over stop put a stop that's more like it one can't go on one can't put a stop (Beckett 1964: 90).

The anonymous character takes Pim's sack after meeting him while not forgetting his remembrances, too. Therefore, exchange between these beings is done similar to exchange between communicating vessels. The "atrocious" character of *How It Is* has the obsession of someone else and makes various calculations on huge sums, "watching the possible number of the others", trying to find out the chances of his meeting the others through the calculation of probabilities. These chances exist although they are very seldom. In the mud of *How It Is* there appears only Pim. Others don't appear at all, all the rest of time. It is as if to each man there is given the possibility of a single meeting, during which the solitary meets the world.

The language of the postmodern novel *How It Is* has a highly poetic pitch and although it seems hard to be deciphered, the reader can get a hint of the implied message: "the three quarters of which the first the journey present formulation and the three quarters of which the first the abandon formulation equally defendable" (Beckett 1964: 131). The course of life sometimes resembles the one of a journey that is supposed to enrich the person to be initiated with a certain experience. However, when encountering several hardships the tormented character is tempted to give up his pursuit for a meaning and a sense for his journey and to abandon his search, eventually. Thus, the gain in the end is bigger than expected.

Beckett once said: 'What do I know about man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes' (Beckett 1995: 192) and with the utmost sincerity, we can observe that although this is attributed to the first person character of the short story *Enough*, it remains very current and thought provoking these days. This statement appears to be quite auto ironic, as if somehow he could not have foreseen his own destiny. He chose to write about the hardships of people on earth, about suffering but he clearly made a difference between a "nothing" that meant nothing (emptiness) and a nothing that was more than nothing. In the novel the main character preserves his dignity and keeps searching for a higher truth, in spite of the hardships he

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encounters. Thus, eternal values such as love, truthfulness and relentlessness, which reveal themselves when engaging closer with the text, remain valid.

> This is why the pre-motive of all things, the God figure, must preclude being and consciousness. Thus, thinking and acting had to coincide. It is "trans-rationalism", "trans-being", it misses any determination, it is "nothing". Hence, this "God figure" (of the negative theology) reveals itself in the triune God and the existing and observing God creates from nothing its creatures whose ideas he recognizes in himself; because this acknowledgement is his creation. Thus, this process of self-acknowledgement belongs to the nature of God: he thus is a timeless necessity, and God does not need his own action of will to create the world. God as a creative entity, as a "unnatured" entity becomes at that moment real as he develops in God and the world as he recognizes itself a created reality, as a "natured" nature. According to Nicolaus Cusanus it is God that creates everything. That means he is everything. Hence, everything after Eckhart has an essence, as long as it is God: what ever appears to them, their spatial and time determination, their "here" and "now" ("hic et nunc") […] is nothing see (Windelband 1892: 265 [my translation]).

5. Conclusions

The work of Beckett evolves in an open way between falsity and truth, among useless people that lost their sense of life. Beyond the death of imagination there has to begin another one, i.e. the death of materiality. But neither the superlatives do have any charm any more, nor do some positive answers satisfy anymore, the fabulation becomes a far away remembrance, people move exactly as corpses or more precisely, as bodies dispossessed of specific vital organs. Beyond this world there is certain 'nothingness'. It generates fear, anxiety, and restlessness in front of the unknown. In this sense it can be affirmed that Beckett's "nothingness" gains a relevant meaning all throughout his literary achievement and by doing this the aesthetic dimension of his work remains flickering, although the reader must confront with it seriously and uncompromisingly. The author created thus an unprecedented formal edifice and an utterly complex work that comprised many of his previous literary concepts and was to set him to another superior level of literary craftsmanship.

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett presents the futility and illogicality of the human condition. He does not present single destinies but tends to generalize the destiny of the individual. With him the totality of the human condition is the one that comes to be questioned, not the man of a certain society, not even the man alienated by a certain ideology which simplifies and modifies at the same time the historic and metaphysical reality, the authentic reality into which man is integrated. Therefore, he presents several relations between human beings in order to render man's struggle for existence and affection in a meaningless world. To what an extent this is being accomplished in Beckett's work becomes the main task of the following paper, the main focus being the universal validity of the human condition and destiny. Thus, these are limited to the ultimate truths of existence and the metaphysical implication of the dramatic discourse. However, the topic of aestheticism being inexhaustible and somehow "in the eyes" of the perceiver it is a prerogative of the argument to stress out the effect on the reader of the narrative as such and to refer strictly to the human condition viewed in a highly philosophical manner.

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